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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASMARA 000617

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LONDON, PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KREC](#) [ASEC](#) [ER](#)

SUBJECT: GSE ALLOWS UK DIPLOMAT TO DEPART ERITREA, BRITISH
COUNCIL EMPLOYEE STILL IN DETENTION

REF: ASMARA ER 581 (IIR 6 908 0340 07)

Classified By: CDA Jennifer A. McIntyre for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[¶1.](#) (C) SUMMARY: A British technician and diplomatic passport holder finally departed Asmara on the evening of July 11. The Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) had refused permission for his departure since July 1. The diplomat, who was on temporary duty assignment in Eritrea from his permanent station in Ethiopia, had been providing technical communications support to the British Council. On June 27, he was noticed by a neighbor on the roof of the British Council with a GPS and camera conducting a survey for upgrading the Council's satellite. Since June 27, the GSE's internal security department, under the guise of a security investigation, has detained, questioned and released one British Council local employee, and taken into custody the acting Director of the British Council (another local national). Days of efforts by the UK Ambassadors to obtain permission from the GSE to allow the technician to depart were unsuccessful. On July 11, the international and London press picked up the story. The diplomat was permitted to leave that evening, although the UK Embassy does not believe the press coverage was the catalyst for the GSE's decision. The acting Director of the British Council remains in detention and incommunicado. END SUMMARY.

[¶2.](#) (C) On June 27, a visiting British technician, diplomatically accredited to the UK Mission in Addis Ababa, was conducting a survey for the British Council for an upgrade to the Council's communications link. The survey included taking a GPS reading and photographs of the satellite dish on the roof of the Council's building. While on the roof, the technician was seen by an Eritrean in a neighboring building who shouted for him to come down. Later in the day, two Eritreans who identified themselves as internal security, came to the British Council and questioned a local national employee there about the activities of the "white man" on the roof. Internal security returned on the following day and questioned the employee again. On June 29, the employee was taken into detention. He was released on July 1. He relayed to UK Ambassador Nick Astbury that he was not physically abused while in detention and was only interrogated once, again to ask what the "white man" had been doing on the roof of the Council building.

[¶3.](#) (C) On July 1, the British technician was scheduled to fly out of Eritrea. Anticipating trouble, Ambassador Astbury accompanied the visitor to the airport. Airport officials

refused to allow the technician to depart. The same day, internal police returned to the British Council and arrested the acting Director of the British Council (an Eritrean national). The acting Director has been in detention at Police Station 1 (located near the UK Embassy) since then and the UK Embassy denied access to visit him. The UK Ambassador reports that the British technician was not directly approached, questioned or harassed by any government official during his time in Eritrea, (other than not being permitted to leave the country for 10 days.)

¶4. (C) From July 1-11, the UK Ambassador met repeatedly, and unsuccessfully, with the MFA's Director for Protocol as well as requesting assistance from the MFA's Director for European Affairs and Presidential Advisors Yemane Ghebremeskel and Yemane Ghebreab to obtain permission for the British technician to depart. In a July 9 meeting, the Protocol Director finally told the UK Ambassador that "internal security" was conducting an investigation into the matter and the British technician would not be allowed to depart until the investigation concluded. The Ambassador's request to the MFA for a meeting with internal security officials was never granted. In pursuit of another avenue to resolve the matter, the Ambassador and British technician also met, at their request, with an official from the Ministry of Communication, hoping that by providing a technical explanation for the technician's activities, GSE suspicions would be allayed. The UK Ambassador wryly noted the meeting was not constructive as the Ministry of Communication representative only wished to speak about the VSAT located at the UK Embassy compound, which he claimed the UK was operating illegally and for which, the official claimed the Embassy owed the GSE a registration fee. (Comment: The GSE's quest to make

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diplomatic Missions register and pay fees for their satellite dishes is an issue that arises periodically and has been consistently rebuffed by the resident Missions. End Comment.)

¶5. (C) On July 11, the UK Ambassador told Charge that the UK Embassy and the British Council in London had been contacted by reporters from the Telegraph and Guardian. The story was, in fact, released in the international press the same day. The British technician was finally permitted to depart Eritrea by air that evening. The UK Ambassador said he did not believe that the press coverage had influenced the GSE's decision as he had been called into the MFA earlier in the day (and prior to the story's release) and informed that the technician would be allowed to depart that evening. The government-controlled, Tigrinyan language newspaper Hadas Ertra contained an article July 12 noting that a British diplomat had been involved in activities other than his official duties but had been allowed to depart Eritrea after conclusion of an investigation. Post has seen no reports yet in the GSE's English language media.

¶6. (C) Comment: The UK Embassy and London FCO view the incident very seriously, as should we. The refusal to allow a diplomatic passport holder to leave the country reflects yet another slide down a slippery slope in the GSE's harassment of the diplomatic missions. Post notes that although the GSE claimed it was conducting a security investigation, the UK Embassy was never granted a meeting with the still faceless "internal security" officials. Nor did the GSE ever request at any point to see either the photos from the digital camera or GPS that the technician had with him on the roof. The UK Ambassador told us that London does not consider the issue closed and the Embassy is sending a diplomatic note to the MFA demanding the immediate release of the British Council employee. He added that London is also considering "sterner measures", which among other actions, could affect the arrival of the new Eritrean Ambassador to London, who has agreement and his visa and is scheduled to depart for London next week. One immediate fallout from the incident was the "delay" in the UK Embassy

issuing visas to prominent party leader Abdallah Jabir and a cultural group making them unable to travel this week to the UK to conduct fund-raising activities with the diaspora. End Comment.

MCINTYRE